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ABSTRACT

A study examined difficulties encountered in producing multiple versions of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) exams administered during a 3-week period to students in the United Arab Emirates University Distance Learning Program for English. The challenges faced in production of the exams included: how to equalize and maintain test item and text reliability for up to seven exam versions; how to modify yet retain validity in multiple test versions created from a limited base of course objectives; how to vary test items and text subject matter while safeguarding reliability and security; and how to produce culturally sensitive but interesting and applicable test materials for Gulf Arab students. A comparative-descriptive statistical analysis of exam success and failure rates for three levels of English during the fall 1996 testing periods (n=312 exams) is also reported. (Contains 16 references.) (MSE)

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Strategies and Disruptions in Test Writing for UAE Distance Learning Students

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Test Writing for UAE Distance Learning Students

1.0 Introduction

This paper will address the *feasibility*, and or difficulties, involved in producing multiple versions of exams administered during a three-week period to students in a United Arab Emirates University Distance Learning Program for English. The challenges faced in the production of these exams included: first, how to equalize and maintain *reliability* of test items and texts for up to seven versions of exams. Second, how to modify, yet retain *validity*, when writing up to seven multiple versions of the same exam from a limited base of course objectives. Third, how to vary test items and text subject matter, yet safeguard *reliability* and *test security*, so that students who take the exams in the first few days, do not effectively disseminate format and possible variation of test items to students in centers with later test dates. Lastly, in keeping with University General Requirements Unit (UGRU) guidelines, test writers were challenged with how to produce culturally sensitive, but interesting and applicable, test material for the Gulf Arab students. In addition to the challenges discussed in the paper, a comparative-descriptive statistical analysis was completed to assess the overall success or failure of the final exam testing periods for the Fall 1996 English Levels 1,2 and 3 final exams. In the analysis, 312 student test scores were examined.

1.1 Introduction to the UAE Distance Learning Program

What is the Distance Learning Program (DLP) in the UAE? The program was created in 1982 by the UAE University Faculty of Education. Nine centers were designated at the following sites: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Fujairah, Um Al Quwaiin, RAK, Al Ain and Merfa. The Centers were created for Emirati elementary and secondary school teachers to upgrade their Associate of Arts Teaching certificate to a Bachelor of Arts in Education. The Merfa Center is the exclusive exception due

to geographical limitations which prevents students living near the Qatar border and on the UAE owned islands in the Persian Gulf from attending university in Al Ain due to transportation purposes. Thus at the Merfa center, the students are regular 5-year university students.

It was not until Winter 1996 that the UGRU English Unit began its involvement with the DLP. It is important to note that UGRU involvement means faculty work with the program design, write and implement curriculum and test, yet are not included in any administrative decision making.

The DLP in the UAE has an older student population (with the exception of the Merfa Center) who juggle work, home and family responsibilities. Thus, the UAE DLP entails all the problems that a regular Adult Education program would include. However, the incentive to achieve is high. Completion of the advanced degree of a BA through Distance Learning would entitle the student to not only a substantial salary increase, but also a rise in position and notoriety in the workplace. In turn, these incentives, along with time restrictions for completion by the university, influence the student to participate in the program with a well-defined goal to succeed.

2.0 Theory of Distance Learning

There are many terms in use to denote distance education: correspondence study, independent study, external study, and distance teaching. There terms have been used to name particular ventures which have been set up over the past forty years, and often overlap. Distance education has been introduced in many countries for the purpose of meeting certain demands and of achieving certain goals. It can be a way of bridging a gap between the growing number of people who want or need education and the limited resources of conventional education.

The theory and definition of distance education is drawn from observation of the many new institutions which have sprung up in the last forty years. One of the first of these was the United Kingdom Open University which has served as a model for similar projects in many other countries.

Perraton (1981, p.13) defines distance education as an educational process in which a significant proportion of teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner. This definition focuses on the most striking difference between conventional education and distance education, that is, the separation in space of the student from the teacher and the freedom in time which the student enjoys.

Dressel and Thompson (1973, in Wememeyer, 1977) define independent study as a self-directed pursuit of academic competence in as autonomous a manner as a student is able to exercise. For the student, the capacity to study independently is a virtue and a major goal of education including conventional education.

Wedemeyer (1977, p.2114-2121) notes that in the USA the use of the term independent study links distance education with developments in conventional education. He defines independent study as those arrangements in which teacher and learner carry out their essential tasks apart from one another, though they communicate in a variety of ways. He also emphasizes the role of the distance learner as well as mentions the various ways of communication by which the distance between learner and teacher is bridged in a course of study.

For the purpose of this study, distance learning implies a pedagogical method where oral teaching is limited and concentrated to a few intensive periods (16 hours) spread out over a 16-week semester. In between these periods, the student studies on his own at home, without the possibility of consulting teachers by phone or letter.

3.0 Current Trends in Worldwide Distance Learning Programs

In one form or another, DLPs are present in nearly all nations that have a regular university program. Perhaps the most common feature of DLPs in many countries which organize distance education, is that the majority of the students are teachers who wish to better their qualifications. Teachers have traditionally been the majority of learners at the Open University in England (Gratton and Robinson, 1975). In a report on DLPs in Australia, two-thirds of these students were teachers (Dahllof, 1976). In the UAE DLP 100% of the students are teachers, with the exception of the Merfa Center whose students are beginning university students studying full-time to become teachers.

If we are to adhere to the working definition of the UAE DLP as outlined above, perhaps the major difference between traditional forms of DLPs and the UAE DLP is the use of media or communications. In traditional DLPs post WWII, the British and American DLPs used radio, television and satellite to enhance DLPs. Later, the telephone became one of the most important aids in distance learning. In DLPs, the telephone is used for conferencing between student and teacher. Daniel and Turok (1975) write that for the telephone to be used effectively, it should be used for both actual teaching and for feedback to the students. Also, fixed consultations are set up between student and teacher to talk about the course, syllabus and assignments, and ask questions. Answering machines have also used so that students can ask questions outside regular working hours.

In the 1990s, the use of the telephone in DLPs has taken a back seat to the Internet. In Iceland, one unified network for communication is based on the Internet. Nearly all schools in the country are connected to this net. This allows an open communication between the student and teacher, as well as student and student. The

Icelandic program allows student work to be dealt with by the teacher within 24 hours of receipt, if possible, and sent back to the student. The Internet has made it possible for students not to have to leave their places of work or their families for schooling and hence limiting the inconvenience of DLP on campus commitments. In turn, this aids in the completion of the course with the specified time limit (Agustsson 1997) A similar Swedish DLP states that the Internet has increased both their enrollment and student success because the Internet is a very feasible. It uses methods which are inherently simple, which are comparatively inexpensive, which work, and which can be easily mastered by the common individual (Agustsson, 1987).

On the whole, communication for these programs takes place via the network. Seminars are conducted on particular modules of the course over the network. The seminars can be held for single groups of students or for all students enrolled in the course, or for the entire network which gives students access to debate and current course information. The data network allows students access to various electronic databases both in Iceland and abroad. In addition to its wide base of uses, the Internet is also used for email. Through email, practitioners send instructional guidelines, send deadline reminders, point out errors and give guidance to DLP participants. Email also ensures teacher/student discussion is preserved in the computer, so the student always has access to what was previously written (Jeppesen, 1987).

3.1 Common Concerns of Worldwide Distance Learning Programs

The most acute concern of DLPs, from an international point of view, is the question of dropouts. High statistical dropout rates have been reported by many DL programs. Perhaps it is connected to the problem which concerns the motives adults have for enrolling for DLPs. In an attempt to clarify this problem Lampikoski (1975) asks which factors can be used to arouse interest in distance education? He believes

the solution is found by demonstrating a greater need for adult education, a greater need of knowledge to cope with the rapid changes in society, a greater equality in education, and a greater amount of leisure time. If student interest is aroused and the realization of the importance of the program sets in and his enrollment in a DLP, then perhaps the dropout rate would lower. Another possible incentive to decrease dropout rates would be the use of the Internet as described above. For example, Lampikoski believes that the student has easy access to communication with the course instructor and faster feedback on questions and work, then student interest would be retained and student dropout rate would decrease.

Unlike other foreign DLPs, the UAE Distance Learning Program has incentives to ensure interest and completion of courses. Economic advancement in salary, rise in position in the workplace, notoriety among colleagues and teaching districts, and a well-defined time limitation to complete all courses within the program. These reasons have curbed a high student dropout rate that is often lamented over in other DLPs.

3.2 Testing Forms in Distance Learning Globally

Although the literature does not address the types and formats of testing in DLPs, it does outline the administration of these exams. Exams, for the most part are given in one of the following ways. First, exams are sent by mail to schools that have undertaken to hold the examinations simultaneously for the DL students. The school guarantees that the examination is taken under the supervision of staff, and then sends the papers back to the university, where grades are awarded. Results are either mailed or e-mailed to students. Second, a written exam is administered at the University at the end of each semester. Another alternative, for students taking the course over computer is to be e-mailed the exam and take the exam at home. A last common alternative, is an oral examination taken at the university or over the telephone.

Each of these methods of examination of DLP students has its advantages and disadvantages. The method the UAE DLP utilizes is to administer the exams at each of the DLP Centers by staff during a two-week exam period. The challenges of which constitute the remainder of this paper.

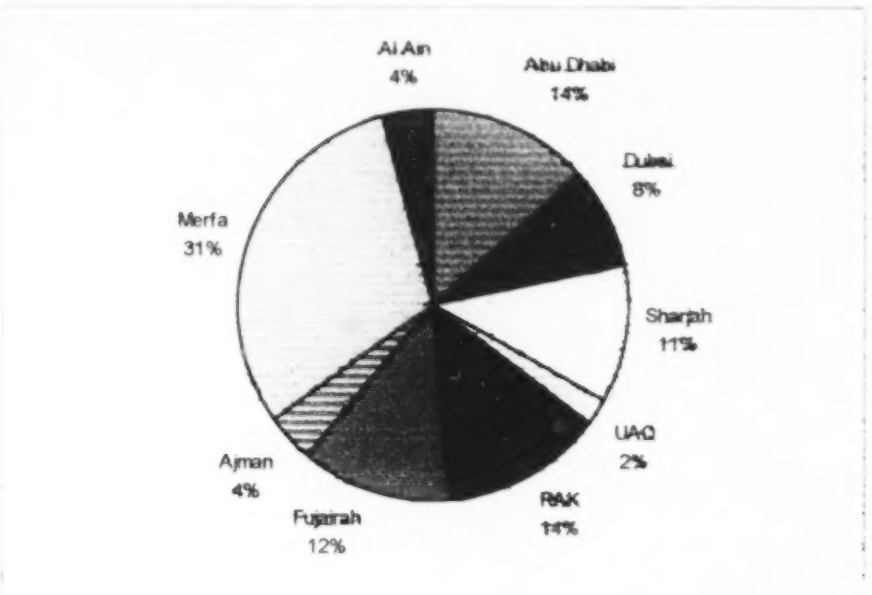
4.0 The Stratagem Behind the UAEU Distance Learning Program

The UAE DLP courses are sixteen hours in length. Lectures are divided over 16 weeks into eight two-hour seminars. Unfortunately, communication with the teacher is restricted between this two-week period. Only one full-time teacher on staff retains office hours one day a week, who may not teach the course the student is registered in. Student access and interaction with this teacher is limited by distance and time availability. UAE DLP students are not privy to internet due to censorship restrictions placed upon the learner by the university.

Other internal guidelines for the UAE DLP include: students being required to attend six of eight lectures to pass a course. All course work must be turned in by assigned time and dates. Written assignments are turned in twice: once for teacher input, and a second time by the student with corrections and revisions completed. Two quizzes are given during the third and seventh lectures, a fifth week midterm, and a final exam upon completion of the eighth. Distance learning students complete examinations, at their DLP Center, within the same time frame as regular UAE University students. All UAE University student rules and guidelines apply to the DLP student population.

4.1 Centers

Each of the seven DLP centers is run by a full-time director who undertakes all program administrative and teaching responsibilities. The following indicates student group breakdown according to size and course. The majority of students are registered at the Merfa Center. As mentioned earlier, The Merfa Center enrolls regular 5- year university students, who are bused in from islands off the coast and villages up to the Qatari border.



4.2 Student Population

As you can see the semester under evaluation is Fall 1996. The total number of students was 312. The total for English Level 1 was 59, Level 2 60, and Level 3 193.

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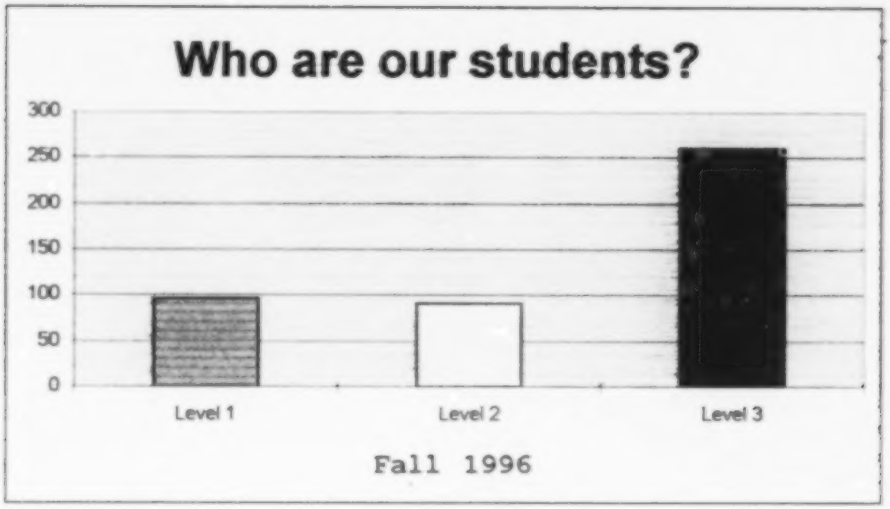

4.3 Curriculum

The curriculum follows UGRU English Levels 1 and 2, with the exception of the listening component. The objective of the UGRU English Program is to provide learning materials, activities and environments which promote mastery of related English language skills (listening, speaking, reading writing, and structure) according to Giannotta, (1998). English Level 3 departs from the UAE curriculum in that it focuses heavily on grammar, developing reading skills and paragraph writing. Each of these Level 3 skills are taught in a content-based unit. A listening component has been deleted from the curriculum. To compensate for not teaching or testing listening due to time constraints, cassette tapes and exercises are provided and marked for the students, but they are not tested on this skill

5.0 The Four Challenges

Challenge 1

The first challenge faced by test writers during the academic 1996 year, was how to equalize and maintain *reliability* of test items and texts. According to Coombe and Hubley (1998), a test is considered reliable if it yielded similar results if it were

given at another date and location. That is, will the test function in the same way at each Distance Learning Center? Also, will the score gained approach the "true score" of the examinee each time it is given, and in a consistent way with different examinees? For example, when Fatma in Fujairah sits down and takes the test, will her score be as *true* as Alia's in Abu Dhabi?

Sullivan and Higgins (1983) claim that the most common cause in the production of unclear assessment questions involves stating the items in a matter that permits more than one interpretation of what is being tested. One way we try to ensure reliability of grammar sections of exams is to write one model sentence and then vary it by one word 7 to 10 times, depending on the number of versions.

Example:	I _____ to the store yesterday. (go) She _____ to the store yesterday. (go) She _____ to the store last week. (go)

A second way we attempt to ensure reliability of reading texts is a technical one. Each text is run through one of two computer programs Flesch-Kincaid or Right Writer. This way whether a reading text is on Mexico or Australia, students at each center will face a text that has been technically measured to be at the same reading level.

Challenge 2

The second challenge is how to modify, yet retain *validity*, when writing multiple versions of the same exam from a limited base of course objectives. By validity, as defined by Brown (1987), we mean, does the test measure what it is intended to measure? For example, there are a limited number of grammar points taught in English Level 2. With this minimal number of grammar objectives how do

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test writers produce questions that are valid, based on course content, but not predictable?

When a regular university 16-week course, which was written for more than 140 contact hours a semester, is reduced to one that meets once every other week for a total of 8 hours, a curriculum of bare bones is left. Many target and course performance objectives had to be revised and cut to meet student needs, yet meet accreditation standards.

For example: Tense Markers for simple present and simple past

He always _____ to class on Mondays. (go)

Today, it _____is hot, yesterday it was warm. (be)

In what ways could these questions be answered? Can the *nuances* of English be taught and tested in this DL course with such a limited time frame? Would not testing for these nuances be considered as teaching/testing a bastardized English? In the end, to retain *validity*, only course curriculum taught to E1 and E2 was tested. Questions were not written to test the possible nuances of English.

Challenge 3

The third challenge is how to vary test items and text subject matter enough, yet safeguard *reliability* and *test security*, so that students who take the exams in the first few days, don't effectively disseminate format and possible variation of test items to students in other Distance Learning Centers. As Coombe and Hubley explained, security is parat of both reliability and validity. Further, they suggest that cultural attitudes *toward collaborative test-taking* are a threat to test security and thus to reliability and validity. DLP students have been known to contact students at other centers, immediately

after taking the test, and report verbatim what was on the exam. Thus, for students who have the exams on days 6, 7, and 8 a reliable pool of test questions have been memorized.

For example, in the Spring 96 semester DLP faculty produced 12 A and B versions for the EL2 testing dates. To alleviate this challenge of 8 separate test dates for EL3, faculty questioned whether it was necessary to write 8 A and B versions to ensure test security. It was found that statistically only 5 A and B versions were necessitated if administered by mixing versions. In this way, it was reasoned, each center would not be able to predict which version would be administered.

Finally, as mentioned previously, the UGRU faculty has no administrative control. This means we do not proctor our own exams. The DL faculty assigned to the center does. Problems arise from this method. The biggest security risk concerns itself with cheating due to inadequate space and number of proctors.

Challenge 4

The last challenge concerns itself with the production of stimulus material which is not culturally offensive to the examinee so as not to distract attention from the task. That is, in keeping with University General Requirement Unit concerns, how to produce culturally sensitive, but interesting and applicable, test material for the Gulf Arab students. As with UGRU students at UAE University, DLP courses avoid topics of religion, sex, politics and music. In addition to that, however, to be culturally sensitive we must be aware of the Gulf Culture itself. That is, test items and texts need to be reflect

an awareness of tribal/family alliances, political and social tensions which are area specific to the Gulf, and an intercultural hierarchy.

For example:

A. The Shamsee tribe is larger than the Mansoori tribe (Merfa)

B. Kuwait has a stronger football team than the UAE. (World Cup Playoffs)

C. Careers Grid: The career of a police officer does not require university education, the work is dangerous, and the salary is low.

In example A, it is important to note that the Al Shamsee tribe and the Al Mansoori tribe have been warring for more than 100 years. Additionally, the majority of students at the Merfa center are Al Mansoori. At other DLP centers this is not a problem. Example B hits on a competitive point between Gulf nations. During the recent World Cup playoffs Kuwait beat UAE to go to the finals. Thus, because soccer is the number one sport here, reactions to such a statement could have caused an emotional response and taken the student off task. A last example of a culturally insensitive question was written in a career grid. The grid referred to the job of a policeman as not requiring a university education, dangerous, and has a low salary. Because the majority employers in the UAE are the police and military, the job of a policeman is considered to be of a high nature. Something that requires special training and in fact pays a higher salary than many other jobs.

These test writing errors in cultural sensitivity could be considered obvious. Yet when multiple versions are written, attention to other factors such as validity and reliability seem to require more attention and cultural sensitivity is often overlooked.

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6.0 Statistical Analysis of UAE University Distance Learning Test Scores

Finally, in an attempt to quantitatively reflect on the success or failure of the Fall 1996 final exam period, a comparative-statistical analysis was completed. A comparison method using descriptive statistics was used to identify the similarities and differences between the final results obtained between UAE DLP students studying English in the Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 programs. A total number of 312 student results were examined and subjected to statistical analysis. A total of 59 English Level 1 student scores, 60 English Level 2 student scores, and 193 English level 3 student scores were subject to review over two semesters beginning in the Fall of 1996.

All students were placed into levels based upon their scores of a standardized placement exam written for Gulf Arab Learners. Students placed into English Level 1 had scores from 0 to 35 percentile. Likewise, students placed into English Level 2 received results ranging from 36 to 59 and English Level 3 from 60 to 89. Therefore, when observing the overall statistical review of the total student population in the DLP as a whole, 10% of the population passed with a score of 90% or higher; 18% of the population passed with a score within the 80-89 percentile: 25% of the total population passed with a score within the 70 to 79 percentile: 26% of the total population passed with a score within the 60-69 percentile; and 21% of the total population failed and were subject to repeating the course.

Mean averages were devised and calculated in points as well as percentages. The English Level 1 mean score was 27.15 out of a total of 40 points. The average mean percentile working out to be roughly 67%. The English Level 2 mean score was 27.433out of a total of 40 points. The average mean percentile working out to be roughly 68%. Low mean scores could be attributed to lack of exposure to English language, exposure to various dialects of English language, exposure to pidgin English

which can be directly attributed to the fact that 80% of the country is run by expatriates from various countries and nations who use English as a medium of communication, and to lack of class interaction since the number of contact hours range from 14-16 hours in an entire semester. In contrast, English Level 3 scores showed that the mean average was in the 70 percentile with an average mean point value of 28.176 out of a total of 40%. It can be hypothesized that English Level 3 students scores were typically higher because before starting the program their exposure to English prior to the placement exam may have been more than those found in the two lower levels.

A total number of 12 E1 students, 16 E2 students, and 38 E3 students failed the final exams. The pass rate for the entire course at each level was significantly higher than what the mean scores from the final tests might seem to indicate. This is because a 35% teacher grade and a 25% midterm grade were awarded to students, in addition, to final exam scores. Because of these two influencing factors, E1 had an 80% pass rate and a 20% fail rate, E2 had a 73% pass rate and a 26% rate of failure and E3 had a 81% pass rate and a 19% rate of failure.

Although, students overall grades for the course may have been higher than their exam grade due to instigating factors mentioned previously, final exam scores in each level of letter grade assigned differed from the overall results. For example, a student with a failing final exam grade of 10/40, a failing midterm grade of 15/25 and a teacher grade of 35/35 could pass the course with a 60% without passing the valid and reliable exams. This is a challenge that the program is working to overcome.

However, in the scope of this study, the following final exam grades were awarded. The number of exams scoring higher than 90% were as follows: E1 5% (3 students); E2 8% (5 students); and E3 10% (20 students). The number of Bs: E1 11%

(7 students); E2 20% (12 students); E3 27% (53 students). The number of Ds awarded for examinations were as follows: E1 42% (25 students); E2 25% (15 students); and E3 22% (44 students). The failing examination population for the levels broke itself down in the following manner: E1 20% (12 students); E2 26% (16 students) and E3 19.6% (38 students).

The standard deviation presented in figure 1.1, shows the list of numbers is spread out around the average. The spread which is usually measured in quantity, reflects that the standard deviation scores were respectably reported at the following levels: E1 stdev (5.132), E2 stdev (6.98), E3 stdev (6.15). The scores reported show an average of deviation from the mean. An alternative check was made to check the standard deviation scores by taking the average number of entries squared and subtracting the average of entries squared. Although, an *idealistic* standard deviation would or should be somewhere in the range of 1 or 2 degrees away from the mean, the standard deviations found were not as perfect as hoped. However, the standard deviations were extremely favorable as they bared close relation to the mean averages: overall, they served as a shadowing indicator of how scores listed were closer to the statistical mean averages which the DLP has tried to achieve through writing valid and reliable tests.

Figure 1.0

Class	n	mean	trmean	median	stdev	min	max	Q1	Q3
E1f96	59	27.15	27.07	27	5.132	14	40	24	29
E2f96	60	27.43	27.75	28	6.988	0	39	23	33
E3f96	193	28.17	28.3	28	6.15	12	40	24	33

A summary of the data for the English Distance Learning students is represented in graph histogram (see figure 1.2, 1.3, 1.4). It is important for interpretation for the reader to understand that a histogram does not need a vertical scale to be interpreted; therefore, all class intervals will be presented in a horizontal format. It must also be noted that histograms have the ability to simply ignore total areas of information, however, the histogram representing the final scores for all levels of the DLP are accurate representations of the current data available. When plotting the percentages, longer blocks of class intervals were not represented as wholes; rather, individual percentages of class intervals were recorded.

The histograms used for this report represent the distributions as if the percents were spread evenly over each class interval. This was done by figuring out the original height of the block over each class interval and then dividing the percent by the length of each interval.

The histograms displayed in the figures, show the relationship between the average and the median. Figure 1.1 of English 1 shows a strong correlation between the average class scores and the median. However, the scores at either end of the scale show an uneven distribution which could have resulted due to a number of variables that have been discussed earlier in this paper. Figure 1.2 shows that scores at the midpoints between 20 and 35 range roughly around a center score of 27 with the majority of average class scores falling within the respective area. Again, the histogram for English 2 shows an uneven spread of averages that appear to be top-heavy showing that the majority of students passed with a score of 50% or higher. This again could be explained by the different final score compilations discussed earlier in the paper. Figure 1.3 demonstrates that the midpoint of 28 correlated the strongest with the average class interval score of 27. The histogram shows a more even bell-

curve distribution of scores being displayed. The differences between the English 3 histograms versus those presented for the two other lower levels can be attributed to wither the number of students in the sample population or to exposure of repeated examination information either learned in previous courses or in the present course materials; of course, it could just as well as been a combination of both or other varying factors associated with DLPs, especially a program such as the one in the UAE where there are so many teachers of different nationalities teaching on many different sites.

Figure 1.1

Histogram of English Level 1 Fall 1996

Midpoint	Count	
14	1	*
16	0	
18	1	*
20	2	**
22	7	*******
24	5	*****
26	10	**********
28	17	*****************
30	4	****
32	2	**
34	3	***
36	5	*****
38	0	
40	2	**

Figure 1.2 EL2

Histogram of English Level 2 Fall 1996

Midpoint	Count	
0	1	*
5	0	
10	0	
15	2	**
20	11	**********
25	15	**********
30	15	**********
35	13	**********
40	3	***

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Figure 1.3 EL3

Histogram of English Level 3 Fall 1996

Midpoint	Count	
12	1	*
14	1	*
16	3	***
18	10	**********
20	8	********
22	14	**************
24	18	******************
26	20	********************
28	27	***************************
30	16	****************
32	18	******************
34	20	********************
36	21	*********************
38	11	**********
40	5	*****

Finally, to ensure reliability, validity and test security of exams, tests given at different intervals were scrutinized by comparing and contrasting mean scores. Empirical proof from closer examination of test scores showed by comparing multiple repeated exam versions administered on different days that mean scores did not raise above one letter grade. The most significant proof was evident in the English 2 course, where men and women from the same emirate had the exam within a nine day lapse of time. Mean scores were virtually the same. Men scored a mean of 26.14 and women a mean of 24.19. a third test was scrutinized from Sharjah emirate because their examination period fell equally between the two RAK testing periods for the same exam. The mean score was 32.00 which is still not a significant difference. To show a significant difference a minimum 10 point spread differential would have had to have been evident. Therefore, test reliability and security were maintained.

7.0

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7.0 Future Directions in Testing UAE Distance Learning Students

In the future, DLP testing should begin to follow UGRU testing procedures more closely. It is also believed that one unified exam date should be mandated. Additionally, class teachers should be able to co-procter exams for two reasons. First, to ensure valid student questions on exam procedures are clear. Second, to uphold UGRU testing policies. Because of the limited class time, perhaps alternative forms of testing could be implemented in future semesters. Another option is to pilot test formats.

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